GAME THEORY

dead center

NIKE

Michael Quercio and Scott Miller

I think having me produce Game Theory was Scott Vanderbilt's idea, I wasn't sure why, but they wanted me. At that time, I had never heard them, but it was a chance to get out of town for a few days and try my hand at doing what I thought a record producer should do . . . stick my nose into other people's songs.

I can't remember an awkward moment with Scott Miller. From the moment we met, Scott and I were joking and kidding like we had known each other all our lives. The band played their songs for me, and here was this guy with this beautiful high voice and beautifully crafted songs that rocked. And I thought he played guitar like Jimi Hendrix.

I immediately decided that we should just get their songs on tape, and I would do my best to capture the magic that was right there before me, to simply share Scott's incredible talent. We laughed a lot, and we talked about everything. Scott was so down-to-earth, unpretentious, unaffected, and incredibly smart. To me, he was an incredibly melodic rocket scientist. It seemed he could talk to you about anything under the sun.

We spent a lot of time together over the years that followed, playing shows together, and he would invite me to come up and sit in on his records. When The Three O'Clock broke up, Scott was there like a true friend and said, "Come play bass with me, and we'll do a West Coast tour." It was the best time I ever had on the road. I'll always remember my friend Scott Miller: brilliant, funny, and perhaps the best songwriter I've ever had the pleasure of knowing.

—Michael Quercio
August 2014

The prospects for a band in a rural California town in 1982-83 were slim. Without a strong cosmopolitan musical subculture to provide community and consistent club dates, the ability to move beyond a small-town setting required not only the absolute commitment of the artists, but also some means to make themselves heard. In the 1980s, a network of pioneering college radio stations mounted an effort across the United States to fill the gap left by the death of free-form FM radio in the late 1970s. Before Internet culture, bands counted on these stations and independent music magazines to spread the word. Very rarely, a small college town would rise above the noise and—thanks to college radio and the independent music press—make a significant impact on the national scene. Athens, Georgia, a town about the same size as Davis and just as rural, had seen the meteoric rise of The B-52's and R.E.M. in the late '70s and early '80s; but the odds of lightning striking twice were remote. As the '80s progressed, the "New Athens" mantle was being applied to much larger cities like Boston and Minneapolis. Davis, California, remained a speck on the musical map. But it was a speck worth closer examination.

With the EPs *Pointed Accounts Of People You Know* and *Distortion*, Game Theory entered a new phase in their development. As their debut album *Blaze Of Glory* began to receive airplay at college radio stations around California, Scott Miller began to consider the band's long-term strategy. As he finished his studies in computer engineering at UC Davis, he seized on the opportunity to completely invest himself in Game Theory. Having turned over the everyday business of the band to his friend Scott Vanderbilt, along with control of his record company Rational Records, Miller dedicated himself to writing, honing his already formidable skill as a guitarist and generally investing his time in studying—for Game Theory. Something of a polymath, Miller had a restless fascination with nearly everything, but his greatest passions were literature, poetry, film, art, and (of course) music. A growing fascination with James Joyce and T.S. Eliot reinforced his belief that his lyrics should be as vital and evocative as his expanding musical vocabulary.

Scott Vanderbilt proved to be an aggressive champion of independent music, with Game Theory as his greatest priority. Through working with Davis' campus radio and Student Entertainment Council, he connected with indie record companies and national booking agencies, and became well versed in the mechanics of indie music. This proved to be of considerable advantage to a band from a small university farming town that had not seen local performers make good since Davis' The Oxford Circle disbanded to form Blue Cheer in 1967. Coincidentally, Scott Miller moved out of his apartment on Davis' Oxford Circle and into new digs in Sacramento, just as Game Theory kicked into gear.

Miller's friend Steve Wynn and fellow Davis cohort Kendra Smith had already left Davis far behind and were beginning to make a name for themselves with The Dream Syndicate in Los Angeles. Legend has it that shortly after arriving in Los Angeles, Wynn took the remaining copies of his and Kendra's lone record with Davis new-wave band The Suspects and dropped them off at the Santa Monica pier. Game Theory remained a Davis-based band, with three members living in town, but for Miller, the era of playing local house parties and the UC Davis coffeehouse was over.

In 1983, Game Theory took a serious stab at making a name for themselves in the national indie music scene. New drummer Dave Gill had a ready-made home rehearsal space that was quickly developing into a solid 8-track recording studio. Gill had a friend with experience as a recording engineer, Dave Scott Millington, and having escaped the stress of managing the business side of things, Miller devoted himself fully to the music. In May 1983, just nine months after forming, a scant five months after the release of their debut album, and just a few months after Gill joined, the band entered Gill's newly constructed Samurai Sound Lab to record the first of two 12-inch EPs that would substantially raise Game Theory's profile.

Scott's songwriting on the EPs was a leap forward from the already essential *Blaze Of Glory*. "Penny, Things Won't" and "Metal And Glass Exact" (from *Pointed Accounts Of People You Know*) were fan favorites and garnered strong acclaim in the American indie scene as the record made it to college stations and to critics across the U.S. More and more performing opportunities came from the San Francisco Bay Area and Los Angeles, and Scott found a fervent fan and fast friend in rising star Michael Quercio, frontman for L.A.'s The Three O'Clock. In 1983,

Left-right: ***Scott Miller, Dave Gill, Fred Juhos, Nan Becker***

The Three O'Clock were at the forefront of Los Angeles' neo-psychedelic Paisley Underground scene, along with like-minded bands The Rain Parade, The Bangles, and The Dream Syndicate. Miller's friendship with Quercio led to collaboration; they spoke of forming a side project as a duo, called Queen Anne's Desk, and soon Quercio was recruited to produce Game Theory's second EP. The band convened with Quercio in December of 1983 to record *Distortion*.

Dave Scott Millington, whose sisters Jean and June Millington had fronted the critically lauded 1970s band Fanny, brought in Jean's then-husband Earl Slick to play on *Distortion*. Slick had played with two of Scott's heroes; he had been David Bowie's lead guitarist through the mid-'70s era of *David Live*, *Young Americans*, and *Station To Station*, as well as the lead guitarist on John Lennon and Yoko Ono's albums *Double Fantasy* and *Milk And Honey*, before returning to David Bowie's band that May. Slick had just wrapped up David Bowie's *Serious Moonlight* tour and was visiting family in Davis while recovering from the 7-month/16-nation tour. He had never heard of Game Theory, but that December he visited Samurai Sound Labs to record a pair of solos for Game Theory's second EP. He listened to Scott's "Shark Pretty" and Fred's "Kid Convenience" and proceeded to play flawless solos on both songs. Due to contractual obstacles, Slick had to be credited under the alias of "Ernie Smith," but his playing was stellar, and with the passage of time, we can properly credit his fine work. Scott was thrilled by Slick's solo on "Shark Pretty" and soon worked it into the band's live version of the song. He would refer back to it when warming up for performances for years to come.

Distortion was released in the spring of 1984 and was embraced by college radio stations across the country. Miller's 1-2-3 punch on Side One of *Distortion* ("Shark Pretty," "Nine Lives To Rigel Five," and "The Red Baron") proved to be some of his most enduring work, songs that have remained fan and critic favorites well into the 21st century.

In August of 1984, Game Theory recorded their follow-up album *Real Nighttime* with producer Mitch Easter (who had helmed R.E.M.'s first four releases). Game Theory then made the bold and risky move of booking a five-week national tour to support *Distortion*, with a stop in New York City in the middle of the tour to receive the *College Media Journal*'s (*CMJ*) America's Best Undiscovered Talent award at a gala show at Studio 54, featuring Lou Reed as the guest of honor.

But the tour was bittersweet. Having bet on the late-arriving possibility of supporting Mitch Easter's band Let's Active on their tour back to the West Coast, Game Theory dropped their existing tour dates but failed to secure the supporting spot. One show was saved, a spot at Memphis' Antenna Club, for which former Big Star frontman Alex Chilton had assembled a trio specifically to play with Game Theory. Alex and his bandmates drove up from New Orleans, and on the way, Alex wrote chord charts for his new trio to sight read on stage. Alex kept that band together for most of his 1980s recordings. For Game Theory, the ill-fated tour's toll was substantial; by the time *Real Nighttime* saw release, the band had disintegrated. The stress of the road had become too much, and by the end of the year, the Game Theory borne of rural Davis, California, were no more. In the winter of 1984, Scott relocated to San Francisco, where a new iteration of Game Theory would soon come to life. But that's an entirely different story.

underwood

room for one more

Scott wrote songs from a very young age, and while he didn't play in cover bands, covers were central to his idea of a great live show. He loved his influences and wanted to share that love. He recorded a version of The Rolling Stones' "Rocks Off" for his first home recording experiments as a 13-/14-year-old boy, and another for his final album, The Loud Family and Anton Barbeau's *What If It Works* LP. He had a gift at live shows for responding to requested songs by quickly picking out the chords and winging his way through the lyrics, as demonstrated here with his version of "Radio Free Europe," which he sorts out in about 10 seconds. His friend Michael Cudahy (formerly of Christmas and Combustible Edison) recalled having Scott join Christmas on stage for an impromptu version of a 1977 punk gem originally by Plastic Bertrand: "One of my fondest rock memories was Scott singing 'Ça Plane Pour Moi' with us at CBGB. After the show, I said, 'I didn't know you spoke French!,' to which Scott replied, 'I don't—that was complete gibberish.'" Scott never disguised his affection for a great song regardless of how unfashionable the song might be; '70s teen-idol Bobby Sherman's "Seattle" and Murray Head's obscurity "Say It Ain't So Joe" were just as worthy of his homage as favorites by Big Star and The Beatles.

The vast spectrum of musical and literary influences on Scott's songwriting reflects a lifetime of intellectual and aesthetic curiosity. But his awareness of many of the artists, to which his early work was compared, came only from his hearing those very comparisons. Certainly Big Star, once he heard them, became a touchstone; but the early Game Theory songs often compared to Big Star were more often informed by some of the same influences that inspired Alex Chilton himself. Scott's 2010 book *Music, What Happened?* makes it clear that he was a man with an insatiable appetite for music, something of a savant when it came to the music that moved him. Still, his earliest and most enduring musical influences were not arcane pop obscurities but exceptional classics: The Beatles, The Monkees, David Bowie, Todd Rundgren, and Roxy Music—music that could be discovered by a young man from California's Central Valley, where the obscure rarely tread.

—Dan Vallor

Scott Vanderbilt, Michael Quercio, *and* ***Scott Miller*** *recording* Distortion *at Samurai Sound Lab*

1. **NINE LIVES TO RIGEL FIVE**
2. **PENNY, THINGS WON'T**
3. **DEAD CENTER**
   (French LP Version)
4. **THE RED BARON**
5. **THE LETTER**
6. **SHARK PRETTY**
7. **METAL AND GLASS EXACT**
8. **SELFISH AGAIN**
9. **TOO LATE FOR TEARS**
10. **LIFE IN JULY**
11. **NO MATTER WHAT** (Demo)
12. **MOTHER OF PEARL** (Live)
13. **NINE LIVES TO RIGEL FIVE** (Live)
14. **TROUBLE** (Live)
15. **SHARK PRETTY** (Live)
16. **GLORIA** (Live)
17. **TOO LATE FOR TEARS**
    (Michael Q's "George Martin" Rough Mix)
18. **RADIO FREE EUROPE** (Live)
19. **PENNY, THINGS WON'T** (Live)
20. **SAY IT AIN'T SO JOE**
    (Radio Session)
21. **DEAD CENTER**
    (Flexi Disc Version)

All songs written by Scott Miller except "The Letter" by Wayne Carson; "Life In July" by Scott Miller/Nan Becker; "No Matter What" by Pete Ham; "Mother Of Pearl" by Bryan Ferry; "Trouble" by Cat Stevens; "Gloria" by Van Morrison; "Radio Free Europe" by Peter Buck/Bill Berry/Mike Mills/Michael Stipe; "Say It Ain't So Joe" by Murray Head

Tracks 2, 7, 8, 10 originally issued on ***Pointed Accounts Of People You Know***, Rational ONA-004 (1983)

Tracks 1, 4, 6, 9 originally issued on ***Distortion***, Rational RGP 8405 (1984)

Tracks 3 & 5 originally issued on the French-only compilation ***Dead Center***, Lolita 5031 (1984)

"I Wanna Get Hit By A Car," "37th Day," and "Kid Convenience," written by Fred Juhos, have not been included at the artist's request.

Scott Miller – Guitar, lead and backing vocals
Fred Juhos – Bass, guitar, backing vocals
Nan Becker – Keyboards, backing vocals, lead vocals on track 10
Dave Gill – Drums

Michael Quercio – Additional backing vocals
Earl Slick – Guitar solo on "Shark Pretty"

Produced by **Scott Miller** (Tracks 2, 3, 5, 7, 8, 10) and **Michael Quercio** (Tracks 1, 4, 6, 9)
Engineered by **Dave Scott Millington**
Co-Engineered by **Dave Gill** (1, 4, 6, 9)

Recorded at **Samurai Sound Lab**, Davis, California, May 1983 and December 1983

Special thanks to **Dan Vallor, Mike Irwin, KCSC, Gail Gordon, George Parsons, John Silva, Lisa and T.O.C., Dr. Becker, Lilly Linares,** and **Pamela Hopkins**

Michael Quercio appears courtesy of **Frontier Records**

Track 11
Scott Miller – Guitars, vocals

Recorded by **Scott Miller** to 4-track, date unknown
Mixed by **Dan Vallor**

Tracks 12, 15
Scott Miller – Guitar, vocals
Gil Ray – Drums
Shelley LaFreniere – Keyboards, backing vocals
Suzi Ziegler – Bass, backing vocals

Recorded live at **The Maintenance Shop**, Ames, Ohio, 9-5-1985. Recorded by **Dan Vallor**

Tracks 13, 19
Scott Miller – Guitar, vocals
Dave Gill – Drums
Nan Becker – Keyboards, backing vocals
Fred Juhos – Bass

Recorded live at The **Elks Club**, Bozeman, Montana, 10-23-1984. Recorded by **Dan Vallor**

Track 14
Scott Miller – Guitar, vocals

Recorded live at **Stevenson College, UC Santa Cruz, California**, 5-24-1985
Recorded by **Dan Vallor**

Track 16
Scott Miller – Guitar, vocals
Dave Gill – Drums
Nan Becker – Keyboards, backing vocals
Fred Juhos – Bass, backing vocals

Recorded live at **Stache's**, Columbus, Ohio, 10-31-1984. Recorded by **Dan Vallor**

Track 17
Scott Miller – Guitar, vocals
Dave Gill – Drums
Nan Becker – Keyboards, backing vocals
Fred Juhos – Bass, backing vocals

Produced by **Michael Quercio**
Engineered by **Dave Scott Millington** with **Dave Gill**
Rough mix by **Michael Quercio** and **Dave Scott Millington**
Recorded at **Samurai Sound**, Davis, California, December 1983

Track 18
Scott Miller – Guitar, vocals

Recorded live at **The Maintenance Shop**, Ames, Ohio, 9-5-1985. Recorded by **Dan Vallor**

Track 20
Scott Miller – Guitar, vocals

Recorded live to air on **The Honey Jo West Show**, KALX FM, UC Berkeley, California, 3-17-1985

Track 21
Scott Miller – Guitar, vocals
Dave Gill – Drums
Nan Becker – Keyboards
Fred Juhos – Bass

Produced by **Scott Miller**
Recorded at **Samurai Sound**, Davis, California
Engineered by **Dave Scott Millington**
Originally intended as an ***Option Magazine*** flexi-disc, but not used

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Visit **loudfamily.com** for Game Theory and The Loud Family's lyrics and much more.

LOOK
LIKE TROUBLE

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